

Film Review: A cinematic exploration of the human instinct to defy and disobey



TOKYO: The final movie in Emir Baigazin's Asian trilogy after "Harmony Lessons" and "The Wounded Angel" is a compelling study of authority and rebelliousness, sparingly narrated. Screened at the 31st edition of the Tokyo International Film Festival last week, "The River" from Kazakhstan is far removed from the kind of cinema that modern generations are used to. Set in a remote Kazakh village, it is a powerful story about generational conflicts and the natural human instinct to defy and disobey.

In "The River," or "Ozen," the line of control is crystal clear, with the father standing tall and intolerant of even the slightest dissent from his five sons, who live in a dry, dusty landscape. The father (Kuandyk Kystykbayev) demands and receives unquestioning obedience from his children and he makes them slog, forcing them to sleep on hard wooden beds. They are hit hard if they err in their duties and he does all this to keep them safe from the wicked world outside their little gated existence.

But the sons see this as worse than slavery, crueler than the harshest of prisons. The father grooms his eldest son, Aslan (Zhalgas Klanov), to take over the reins of the family. Hidden behind Aslan's almost emotionless face is a rebel — he takes his siblings to the river, a place strictly forbidden by his father, and the youngsters build a cross and hang a scarecrow in one of a few Biblical references in the film.

Then the monotony is broken by the visit of a mysterious distant cousin, Kanat (Eric Tazabekov), whose jazzy clothes — jolting against the bleached landscape of the boys' village, created by thoughtful cinematography on Baigazin's part — and electronic tablet imply that there is more to the world than the young boys previously believed.

Kanat's technology brings with it conflicting news from the world beyond the village, which leads to shifting familial relations, tensions between the bothers and quickly dissolves the sibling's warped sense of paradise in this raw exploration of freedom, family and dissent.
